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Synopsis

A hard-core Marxist that Utpal Dutt was, thanks to his education and reading of Marx, Engels, Lenin and others in his early years, he wanted to revolutionize the common mass against the oppression and exploitation of the ruling class and the bourgeois. He always tried to expose their true nature in his plays and show how people can bring psycho-socio-cultural changes in society. At the same time Dutt stood as a controversial figure, even to his own group members. He has often been criticized for his use/misuse of history in his plays and using them against a particular class. He has been openly criticized as anti-patriotic person, as anti-communist, a tout of China and so on. There have been varied opinions and criticisms on Utpal Dutt and his theatre. Dutt supported the Naxalite Movement in the beginning and spoke out for it but later on regretted supporting the movement. There is still a mystery around his controversial release from jail on 3rd January 1968. So, taking all appreciation and controversies in consideration, we might consider Utpal Dutt as the two headed Greek God, Janus. Dutt was continually worked in the commercial films that do not subscribe to the ideals based on which he wrote his own plays, produced in Bombay and Kolkata. So, questions arise whether there was a gap in his theory and praxis, or whether he was clever enough to reap the fruits of capitalism and use it against the same. My research will focus on the political allegories, exploring them as necessary, circulated on and around Utpal Dutt, the person, his plays, and his theatre practice. Parallelly, I shall try to explore the controversies of Dutt's political theatre, how Dutt politicized the aesthetics of theatre and brought about a change in Bengali theatre. I would like to look for acceptable and credible answers as to how far and how successfully Utpal Dutt used theatre as an activism in his revolutionary approach to established notions and practices of power in a state.

To understand Utpal Dutt's theatre better we must, first, understand the type of theatre he was trying to make, the ideological standpoint of Dutt, the framework that he had in mind. His nonfictional writings like *On Theatre, Towards a revolutionary Theatre* and a few other writings and interviews give us an idea of Dutt's Theatrical practices. Dutt was the pioneer of political theatre in Bengal. In his article 'What is to be Done' published in *On Theatre,* Dutt describes what should be the way and form of political theatre. Dutt, who was an out and out Marxist, had a Marxist idea of art. He says:

> I propose to talk of political theatre in our country—its tasks and the various means the ruling class adopts to corrupt and deflect it from its goal. There will be no attempt to address those who consider the theatre a 'pure' art, who love it for its own sake. They

> rather remind me of those rich young men in affluent countries who seek to relieve their boredom with drugs. I do not think we can afford such expenses in a country like India, where 40 per cent of the masses still do not receive two square meals a day. (3)

Political theatre according to Dutt uplifts the minds of men and makes them conscious of the ideological repression that they have been put into for years. The bourgeois, in India, promotes certain art forms, values and cultures as the 'eternal Indian values' in such a way that the people start believing them as true, which in return serves their class interest, justifies their exploitation and repression of the common masses. He gives the example of the Congress party and says how they promoted non-violence as the Indian value concocted from the ancient Indian books. This was to make the people follow the non-violent path whereas making them oblivious of the torture and violence of the state in different spheres. He says, "It is one of the ideological weapons of the ruling class to enslave the minds of men" (Dutt, *On Theatre* 4). This is why they want people to forget the long tradition of violent freedom struggle of India and lie it only as the non-violent political movements led by Gandhi. Dutt wanted to examine critically such notions and find out for the audience what he believed to be the truth and make the people conscious of the bourgeois exploitation.

A hard-core Marxist, Utpal Dutt always demanded and aimed for a kind of theatre having a specific political purpose. Dutt was fond of Erwin Piscator and he too believed in political theatre. Piscator in his book *The Political Theatre* said, "In all my publications, I have always made it unmistakably clear that a theatre for which I am responsible must be revolutionary (within the limits that its commercial situation prescribes) or nothing at all. Any theatre I manage serve neither to produce 'art' nor to do 'business' (320). In his own treatise "What is to be Done" published in on theatre he says, "…political theatre rediscovers the true historical facts and proves that violence has been the midwife of all social change in the past, will continue to be so in the future. The political theatre tries to restore to the masses their revolutionary traditions…." (Dutt. *On Theatre,* 4)

The production of Utpal Dutt's own play *Kallol* ('The Wave') on 28th March 1965 created literal waves of criticism in Bengal and Delhi. This play re-produces the historic Naval Mutiny of 1946 and exposed how influential roles of the British and the Congress party in suppressing the revolt. This showed how the Congress Party betrayed the cause of the revolution. Utpal Dutt himself said that *Kallol* not only told the historical heroic stories of the Navy and the workers but also depicted the betrayal of the Congress Party. The play tried to say that non-violence of the Congress is merely a ploy to support the British Imperialists, there is no way out except armed revolution. This story of the play *Kallol* created debate as to how far the historical facts are true and justified and how far this story represents the Naval Mutiny of 1946. Another effect that the play brought with its first production was that advertisement of the play was banned in all the established newspapers of the time except *The Statesman*. But it could neither stop Dutt and his members from producing the play nor could stop the people from watching the play. They published leaflets advertising the production of the play and spread throughout Kolkata. The play was played at different places in different names. Dutt was arrested and had to spend seven months in jail. In support of the play *Kallol* and in demanding freedom of Dutt from jail all the artists, intellectuals and common people gathered in a protest march on 7th May 1966.

Another incident in reference to Utpal Dutt's Play *The Nightmare City,* was first performed in Bengali on 16th May 1974 at Kalamandir by People's Little Theatre, shows how

effective Dutt's plays were during that time. The play *The Nightmare City* is a living document of the tyranny of the government tied up with the police, money-lenders, businessmen, and political leaders. The cast and crew of this play were attacked brutally and there were so many conspiracies going on to not permit the play to be performed. On 26th August 1974 PLT was going to perform *Duswapner Nagari* (*'Nightmare City')* at the Star Theatre, but ruffians attacked the members of the PLT group even in the presence of the armed police force. They could not perform the play that day. This incident provoked all the theatre lovers, intellectuals, and the media into a huge protest. The police accused Utpal Dutt and PLT under IPC 124(A) for writing and producing *Duswapner Nagari* allegedly committing crime against the state. The allegations were as follows: 1. The play attacks the capitalist class. 2. The play attacks the police. 3. In the play the ruling party has been attacked. Applying 124(A) of the IPC in this way against a theatre group was just an attempt to choke the voice of theatre. One of the major characteristics of his themes is to expose the ways of the ruling class through which it tries to maintain its own views undermining the opinions of the common mass (83). By doing so, Dutt tries to form a mass movement against the ways of the ruling class, to get rid of their suppression, physical and psychological.

The texts chosen for this study are randomly selected plays of Utpal Dutt like *Kallol, Angar, Barricade, The Nightmare City, Rifle, Teer, The Great Rebellion, Hunting the Sun* and his non-fiction like *What is to be Done, Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* and other essays. The different chapters will deal with the history of Utpal Dutt's Theatre and Film Career, Dutt's Political Theatre, Dutt's Proscenium Plays, his Jatra and Street Corner Plays, and Encountering Capitalism/Non-Fictional Writings.

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